DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 781 CS 003 823

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TITLE Reading Ecology and Instructional Strategies for International Students.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western College Reading Association (10th, Denver, Colorado, March 31-April 2, 1977) ; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); Foreign Students; Higher Education; Language Instruction; Linguistic Competence; *Performance Based Education; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Material Selection; *Reading Programs; *Second Language Learning; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This study asserts that international university students need a reading program which stresses (1) the student's understanding of and adaptation to the political, social, and economic forces of the United States and (2) the development of communication skills in standard American English. In developing a program of competency-based instruction and group seminars for students from 48 countries attending Texas Southern University, the researchers propose two objectives: to measure, through objective tests, the extent to which knowledge about language can assist in raising the level of reading comprehension; and to develop learning materials and teaching techniques which show the interaction of language and thought and which illustrate the use of language in comprehension and decoding. Eight competency-based instructional modules are described, and several recommendations for their use with international students are included. (MAI)

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READING ECOLOGY AND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Paper read at Tenth Annual Conference of the Western College Reading Association, Cosmopolitan Hotel, Denver, Colorado, April 1, 1977.

CS 003823

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Introduction

Amid the various university academic experiences provided for international students, there should exist a program especially designed to develop individual character, conduct, motives and private affairs. Such a personalized learning system can be affected through the implementation of a reading program which would function to effect an intense consideration and comprehension of the interrelationships that exist between oneself and one's environment.

The reading program should focus upon the international students' recognition, comprehension, reaction and adaptation to the political, social and economic forces within the United States.

Special attention should be given to these factors as they affect the international students' university exposure.

The transition from one country to another is perhaps one of the most traumatic periods of life faced by many international students. Often the international students find that all their hours of learning and studying did not truly prepare them for the realities encountered in American colleges and universities.

It is apparent that many international students experience academic difficulty. A large percent of the difficulty can be attributed to poor reading skills and the inability to communicate effectively in standard American English. These factors may contribute to a vast communication gap between students, teachers, and instructional materials. How to successfully bridge the communication gap for international students is a major concern of instructors in American institutions of higher learning.

Program

The literature reviewed contained many divergent opinions as to how the problem of teaching reading to speakers of nonstandard English should be treated. Several alternatives were suggested. The most frequently suggested means of treating the problem in the classroom were: 1. teach standard English as a second language (Sledd, (10); Feigenbaum, (3); Allen, (1); Slager, (9); Corbin and Corsby, (2); 2. use a developmental rather than a remedial instructional approach to reading (Musgrave, (8): Gumprez and Hernandez-Chavez, (5); and 3. accept dialect as a systematic

language system common to a particular ethnic group (Landers, (6), and emphasize the fact that as a student progresses on the mastery of linguistic principles in his second language, he will experience less difficulty performing in that language (Lucas and Singer, (7). These alternatives were considered when a reading program was designed for international students.

It was decided that the instructional reading program should be designed to improve the reading comprehension of international students by teaching them how to apply principles of the structure of the English language since reading involves the interaction of language and thought as language is decoded and meaning is reconstructed as suggested by Goodman (4). In light of Goodman's definition of reading, it was hypothesized that the limited knowledge of the structure of the English language by many international students is a causative factor in their performance on varied reading materials.

Objectives. The basic programmatic objectives are: (1) To determine the extent to which knowledge about language can be applied to raise the level of reading comprehension as measured by objective tests; (2) To develop and provide learning materials and techniques which international students can use to understand (a) the interaction of language and thought, (b) how the reader uses language in comprehending what he reads, and (c) how the meaning of reading material is reconstructed from the decoded language.

Instructional Strategies. The need for an intensive reading program became paramount in the Fall of 1976 when it was discovered that 1011 students from 43 different countries were admitted to Texas Southern University. The majority of these students evidenced difficulty in reading materials written in standard American English. In view of this fact, instructional strategies were revised to emphasize reading as a language related process that requires understanding patterns of structure and meaning. It was then decided that the students' needs could best be met through developmental competency-based instruction and group seminars. Thus, competency-based instructional modules were constructed and implemented.

Modules were designed to develop the following competencies:

1. Develop effective communication skills
2. Develop analytical skills
3. Develop decision making and problem solving skills
4. Develop awareness and understanding of the structure and history of the social and political institutions
5. Develop knowledge, understanding, and responsiveness of the natural and/or physical sciences
6. Develop understanding of arts and humanities and the contributions they make to the technological base
7. Develop awareness and understanding of the similarities and differences of ethnic groups
8. Develop awareness and knowledge of behavior patterns which affect personal and social relations.

Students are taught basic patterns of English and given oral drills before they meet it in their reading. Care is taken to

make certain that most of the vocabulary in the reading selections be familiar to the students. However, some words are not familiar because students must learn to face passages in which there are some unfamiliar words. This technique will train the students in ways of discovering meanings for unfamiliar words. Additionally, this technique will also teach students to use the essential structures of the language.

Oral reading of fiction is performed frequently. Students are given models to imitate. The models may be the teacher reading orally, recordings made by the teacher or reputable native English speakers. The students should always be facing the class, with the teacher facing them at the back of the room when they read aloud. This method will allow the teacher to see that the students read clearly, audibly, and intelligently. This method will also allow the teacher to observe the students' expressions to determine whether the meaning of the passage is adequately conveyed without unnatural variation of stress or intonation. Next, the students engage in silent reading followed by questioning to make sure the passage is fully understood.

The teacher should stress the point of reading for information. The information sought should be directed toward real situations to which the students can relate now or later in scientific and technical areas. Resource materials should be available in large quantities of varied texts which will provide this kind of information. The text materials should also vary in the stages of the application of linguistic principles. The materials should be

readily available in and outside the classroom and reading center. The more varied the materials in range of subjects and levels of language difficulty, the better it is for the students because it will help them acquire explicit understanding.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered in the use of developmental competency-based modules for international students:

1. The reading materials must be simplified.
2. The reading materials must be written within the linguistic range of the students at varying structural level of the English language.
3. Introduce the use of the English dictionary after the students have learned how to relate meaning to context.
4. Provide and insist on intensive practice in discovering meaning from context.
5. Always encourage the students to read extensively.

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